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John Richards, reviews of:

The Young Dürer: Drawing the Figure (London, The Courtauld Gallery, 17 October 2013 – 12 January 2014). Catalogue *The Young Dürer: Drawing the Figure*, ed. Stephanie Buck and Stephanie Porras. London, 2013. 288 pp. with 200 colour illus. £40. ISBN: 978 1 907372 51 3 (hardback) 978 1 907372 53 7 (paperback).

Antiquity Unleashed: Aby Warburg, Dürer and Mantegna (London, The Courtauld Gallery, 17 October 2013 – 12 January 2014). Catalogue *Antiquity Unleashed: Aby Warburg, Dürer and Mantegna*, ed. Marcus Andrew Hurttig. London, 2013. 56 pp. with 30 illus. £11.95. ISBN: 978 1 907372 58 2.

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The running of these two exhibitions at the same time and in close proximity to one another was an inspired idea, allowing for longer perspectives than the self-enforced limits of each show alone might have permitted. *The Young Dürer* occupied two rooms and *Antiquity Unleashed* one, reached via a corner of one of the Courtauld's exhibition spaces devoted to early twentieth-century German painting, allowing a rather startling palate cleanser in the form of figure paintings by Erich Heckel, Max Pechstein and others. Both exhibitions were staged with exemplary clarity, and were nicely spaced and very well lit which, given the constraints of preservation, were especially important considerations in the case of the larger exhibition, with its many drawings. Publicity material was excellent, pitched to just the right level of expected spectator, and both catalogues are very good, that for *The Young Dürer* being substantial, beautifully illustrated and featuring a series of essays by leading Dürer scholars.

The stated purpose of *The Young Dürer* was to build on the research surrounding the major exhibition, *The Early Dürer*,<sup>1</sup> held at the Germanisches

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<sup>1</sup> Catalogue: Daniel Hess and Thomas Esser (eds.), *The Early Dürer* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012).

Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg in 2012 via a more concentrated and focussed examination of the artist's earliest drawings in the context of the art of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries. To that end, works by Dürer were here juxtaposed with several works by major figures such as Martin Schongauer and the Housebook Master, artists whose formative relationship with the young Dürer figure substantially, though with a considerable variety of emphasis, in the historiography. One of the most intriguing and stimulating facets of this exhibition was the inclusion of works by less celebrated, or even less certainly identified, artists such as Anton Puerer, represented by a half-length ink drawing of a woman once owned by Dürer himself and dated by him on the sheet to 1487 (Hamburg, Kunsthalle, Kupferstichkabinett). Comparisons between this drawing and some of the earlier drawings by Dürer himself which were close at hand demonstrated the clear superiority of Dürer's graphic technique, even at this stage and even where he too shows signs of uncertainty. In this respect the catalogue is an essential partner to the exhibition, placing special emphasis on the Courtauld's own ink study of a *Wise Virgin* (1493) (cat. XX, Fig. 1) in a searching catalogue entry by Stephanie Buck which clarifies both Dürer's ambitions and the areas in which ambition could still run ahead of visual solutions. It is characteristic of both the clear thinking behind the exhibition itself and the qualities of the catalogue that as well as reproducing (in colour and full page) the verso of this sheet, on which Dürer drew his own legs in a rapid cursive style, the catalogue also prints it (p. 36) rotated through 180 degrees, revealing what the artist actually saw (Fig. 2).

This juxtaposition of two major strands of Dürer's early work – observation from nature and the construction of figures based on the work of other artists – comprised a major theme of the show and ran through a number of the most striking

exhibits, such as the *Holy Family* and *Self Portrait of 1491-2* (Erlangen, Graphische Sammlung der Universität; cat. XX), recto and verso of the same sheet and the sheet with recto and verso Madonnas and studies of drapery (recto) and the artist's hands (verso) of the same period (London, British Museum; cat. XX). Pure observation from nature, or something like it, was represented by the oft-reproduced drawing of *Mein Agnes* (c. 1494, Vienna, Albertina; cat. XX) and the less well known study of a sleeping man, tentatively identified as Dürer's master, Michael Wolgemut (c.1493-4, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett; cat. XX). Most intriguing of this group, and from the same period, is the double sided sheet showing studies of the artist's left hand in various gestures and (verso) a pair of feet and three heads (cat. XX). The largest of these heads was identified by Alice Strobl as the artist's mother, Barbara Dürer (née Holper), an identification accepted by others since and in the catalogue, which reproduces for comparison the great and very well known charcoal study of his mother made by Dürer in 1514 (Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett), a drawing at once compassionate and ruthless (cat. XX). The resemblance between the two heads, with twenty years of attrition between them, is persuasive, as are the clear affinities with the artist's own features and with those of his brothers in Dürer's various studies of them. In this context the catalogue takes a firm line on the tendency of Dürer historiography to see the artist's face in too many of his images, e.g. the *Youth Kneeling Before an Executioner* of c.1493 (London, British Museum), where Stephanie Porras corrects the rather unfocussed assertion of Karl Gerhard Evers that the youth is a psychological self portrait (p. XX) and John Rowlands' suggestion (p. XX) that Dürer used himself as the model for the youth's long torso, pointing out that this conforms to established Schongauer models, such as the *Flagellation* engraving of c. 1470-3, exhibited here (cat. XX).

It is precisely the relationship between nature and art that makes this period of Dürer's work so fascinating, and the material exhibited in *The Young Dürer* militates against too facile a 'Renaissance' reading of the artist's development seen as a process of the replacement of Gothic conventions in response to Italian ideas of nature and the Antique. The value of having the smaller Warburg exhibition close at hand was nowhere more clearly established than by the presence, as the last image in the whole sequence, of *Melencolia I* (1514) (cat. XX), a work vastly more sophisticated both formally and iconographically than the early studies of *The Young Dürer* show, but which manifestly connects to these earliest attempts by the artist to master the pyramidal Schongauer format for the seated figure.

*Antiquity Unleashed* was based on Table 49 of Warburg's *Mnemosyne*, at the centre of which cluster sat Dürer's drawing *The Death of Orpheus* (1494, Hamburg, Kunsthalle; cat. XX), exhibited in London facing a group of the engravings by Mantegna which so clearly fascinated Dürer. Though Dürer's own drawings after these engravings were not present, they are reproduced in the catalogue to *The Young Dürer* (cats. XX, XX, xx). The material of that exhibition showed the young artist grappling with the problems and opportunities attendant on translating the measured graphic stroke play of Schongauer's prints into the more cursive and exploratory realm of fast drawing. The drawing after Mantegna's *Battle of the Sea Gods* (cat. XX) reveals a distinctly more advanced stage in the process, as Dürer subjected the flat utilitarian shading of his source to the rich textures of German engraving style. This could be seen as 'orchestration', but it would perhaps be more to the point to see it as something more aggressive and acquisitive, Dürer inventing at second hand, rather in the manner of Stravinsky's recompositions of Gesualdo and Tchaikovsky.

An issue inextricably related to that of Dürer's Italian experiences is that of pictorial space. The engraved *Holy Family with a Dragonfly* (c.1495; TYD cat. 15) shows all too clearly the problems Dürer faced in this area. Something of the gains and losses involved in the transition from drawing to print, rather a sub-theme of *The Young Dürer*, were clarified by the juxtaposition of the engraved *Prodigal Son* (c.1496; cat. XX) with the related brown ink study (c.1495/6, London, British Museum; cat. XX, Figs. XX, XX). In one respect one might take issue with the excellent catalogue entry on the two sheets by Stephanie Buck, which characterises the spatial recession of the finished product as superior to that of the drawing (p. XX). The drawing is necessarily more tentative, but to these eyes at least, Dürer seems to be attempting a seamless transition from foreground to background – across a continuous middle ground – which he abandons in the engraving (otherwise more resolved in many aspects, to be sure), falling back on the use of overlapping 'flats' like those of the *Holy Family with a Dragonfly* to bind his composition together. Such observations are, of course, personal and provisional, and it is exactly this sort of cross referencing within the extraordinary ferment of Dürer's early work that this excellent exhibition allowed. It is just what such shows are for.